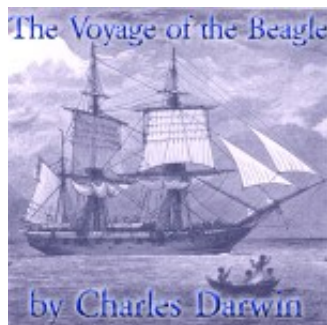


The Voyage of the Beagle by Charles Darwin

by Rev. Joe Dirt - Sunday, March 01, 2015

<http://www.curmudgeon-alley.com/the-voyage-of-the-beagle-by-charles-darwin/>



Charles Darwin is one of the greatest intellects that mankind has produced. He is also a great communicator and writer. This book was well received by a populist audience in its time. It is still an immensely accessible book. It is at times even poetic.

“Among the scenes which are deeply impressed on my mind, none exceed in sublimity the primeval forests undefaced by the hand of man; whether those of Brazil, where the powers of Life are predominant, or those of Tierra del Fuego, where Death and decay prevail. Both are temples filled with the varied productions of the God of Nature:—no one can stand in these solitudes unmoved, and not feel that there is more in man than the mere breath of his body.”

The book is first, and foremost a travelogue. The *HMS Beagle* left England just at the end of 1831 for a planned 2 year expedition. The voyage stretched out to almost five years, and circumnavigated the globe. The actual time Darwin spent on the *Beagle* was about 18 months. The remainder of his time was on land. The focus of the *Beagle* was hydrographic surveys around the coasts of the southern part of South America. Darwin spent this time traveling in South America, reconnecting with the *Beagle* at various ports. I am going to estimate that about a third of the book deals with his travels across South America.

Darwin was originally recruited for the expedition as a naturalist, but his observations also include geology, paleontology, anthropology, and sociology. As a naturalist he commented on both animal and plant kingdoms. Most people rightly associate Darwin with the theory of evolution. He was also considered one of the premier geologists of his times. This book highlights much of his skill in that area, especially in the interpretation of geological formations.

“It required little geological practice to interpret the marvellous story which this scene at once unfolded; though I confess I was at first so much astonished that I could scarcely believe the plainest evidence. I saw the spot where a cluster of fine trees once waved their branches on the shores of the Atlantic, when that ocean (now driven back 700 miles) came to the foot of the Andes. I saw that they had sprung from a volcanic soil which had been raised above the level of the sea, and that subsequently this dry land, with its upright trees, had been let down into the depths of the ocean. In these depths, the formerly dry land was covered by sedimentary beds, and these again by enormous streams of submarine lava—one such mass attaining the thickness of a thousand feet; and these deluges of molten stone and aqueous deposits

five times alternately had been spread out. The ocean which received such thick masses, must have been profoundly deep; but again the subterranean forces exerted themselves, and I now beheld the bed of that ocean, forming a chain of mountains more than seven thousand feet in height.”

When you read about Darwin and the evolution of his theory of evolution, one thing that is brought up over and over again is that he noticed that birds of a genus had evolved into different species on islands separated by minimal geographical distances. Knowing this I found this following passage very interesting. It took him a while to clue into the importance of those differences.

“I have not as yet noticed by far the most remarkable feature in the natural history of this archipelago; it is, that the different islands to a considerable extent are inhabited by a different set of beings. My attention was first called to this fact by the Vice-Governor, Mr. Lawson, declaring that the tortoises differed from the different islands, and that he could with certainty tell from which island any one was brought. I did not for some time pay sufficient attention to this statement, and I had already partially mingled together the collections from two of the islands. I never dreamed that islands, about 50 or 60 miles apart, and most of them in sight of each other, formed of precisely the same rocks, placed under a quite similar climate, rising to a nearly equal height, would have been differently tenanted; but we shall soon see that this is the case. It is the fate of most voyagers, no sooner to discover what is most interesting in any locality, than they are hurried from it; but I ought, perhaps, to be thankful that I obtained sufficient materials to establish this most remarkable fact in the distribution of organic beings.”

In an earlier post, [Charles Darwin on Slavery](#), I included a passage that detailed his abhorrence to the institution of slavery.

After South America and the Galapagos, the *Beagle* visited Tahiti, New Zealand, Australia, and several tropical islands including many atolls. Darwin was impressed by the natives of Tahiti and found the natives of New Zealand lacking in many qualities.

“In the evening I went with Captain Fitz Roy and Mr. Baker, one of the missionaries, to pay a visit to Kororadika: we wandered about the village, and saw and conversed with many of the people, both men, women, and children. Looking at the New Zealander, one naturally compares him with the Tahitian; both belonging to the same family of mankind. The comparison, however, tells heavily against the New Zealander. He may, perhaps be superior in energy, but in every other respect his character is of a much lower order. One glance at their respective expressions, brings conviction to the mind that one is a savage, the other a civilized man. “

Many people consider Darwin’s deductive reasoning on the origins of Pacific island atolls to be second only to his work on evolution. The last part of the book dealt heavily with this subject. It was perhaps the only part of the book I found a bit tedious, but it was in the end delightful to follow his reasoning on how atolls came into being. Here is an interesting link if you care to read more on the subject: [Darwin and Coral Reefs](#)

One thing that struck me through the book was how British Darwin was and how proud of all things British.

“We continued slowly to sail down the noble stream: the current helped us but little. We met, during our

descent, very few vessels. One of the best gifts of nature, in so grand a channel of communication, seems here wilfully thrown away—a river in which ships might navigate from a temperate country, as surprisingly abundant in certain productions as destitute of others, to another possessing a tropical climate, and a soil which, according to the best of judges, M. Bonpland, is perhaps unequalled in fertility in any part of the world. How different would have been the aspect of this river if English colonists had by good fortune first sailed up the Plata! What noble towns would now have occupied its shores! Till the death of Francia, the Dictator of Paraguay, these two countries must remain distinct, as if placed on opposite sides of the globe. And when the old bloody-minded tyrant is gone to his long account, Paraguay will be torn by revolutions, violent in proportion to the previous unnatural calm. That country will have to learn, like every other South American state, that a republic cannot succeed till it contains a certain body of men imbued with the principles of justice and honour.”

Or later on in the book when they sailed into Sydney harbor:

“At last we anchored within Sydney Cove. We found the little basin occupied by many large ships, and surrounded by warehouses. In the evening I walked through the town, and returned full of admiration at the whole scene. It is a most magnificent testimony to the power of the British nation. Here, in a less promising country, scores of years have done many more times more than an equal number of centuries have effected in South America. My first feeling was to congratulate myself that I was born an Englishman.”

There are several good reasons to read this book. First, it is a fascinating travelogue of how the world was in 1840. We are allowed the privilege of a first class mind detailing to us that world and various peoples he encountered in it. If you are biology major like me, the natural history and science is fascinating. Perhaps the best reason is to follow Darwin’s reasoning as he explored the biological and geological phenomena he encountered on his travels.

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